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ABSTRACT

This paper describes residential week-long seminars offered at the North Carolina Center for the Advancement of Teaching (NCCAT) in Cullowhee, North Carolina, Western Carolina University. The center was established in 1985 to reward and support outstanding full-time teachers in North Carolina and to enhance teaching as an art and as a profession. The center operates under three principles: reward, renewal, and retention. Participants are rewarded by an all-expense paid trip to the mountains where they are pampered and have free access to recreational facilities. The primary means for renewal and development is the living or interdisciplinary seminar, which is intended to foster creativity and problem-solving skills. Participants are allowed to choose from a variety of seminars and are encouraged to select topics with which they are only marginally familiar. The seminars are planned by specialists in the arts, humanities, and sciences, assisted as necessary by faculty at Western Carolina University. Keeping the state's most competent teachers in the classroom, i.e., retention, is the core mission of the center. The cost for each participant is approximately $1,650 and is completely paid for by the state of North Carolina. Although it is too early to evaluate whether the program has been successful in keeping competent teachers in the classroom, the center appears to have a visible impact on participants. Many teachers request to return to the center to work on individual projects, and for them alumni seminars have been developed. It is suggested that small, rural colleges may be in a position to offer residential seminars that could be tailored for particular professional groups and their needs. (LP)

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Cullowhee: A Place of Renewal and Professional Growth

James J. Kirk

Small colleges and universities located in picaresques rural communities may be desirable setting for delivering a relatively new type of educational programing. For example when the state of North Carolina was looking for an ideal location for its North Carolina Center for the Advancement of Teaching (NCCAT), it chose Cullowhee, a small village in the Great Smoky Mountains. Located near Western Carolina University the tranquil village offered panoramic views of spectacular mountain vistas, towering pine forests, and crystal clear trout streams. Facilities at the university included dorm accommodations, food services, seminar rooms, library, knowledge faculty, swimming pools, tennis courts, and jobbing trails. In short, most of accruements necessary for a high quality renewal experience were present in Cullowhee.

A Unique Mountain Retreat

NCCAT, nestled away in in the Great Smokey Mountains, is a place where outstanding educators have an opportunity to gather for personal and professional rejuvenation. The center was established in 1985. Its stated purpose is twofold: (1)reward and support outstanding teachers and (2)enhance teaching as an art and as a profession (McPherson, Rinnander, & Rud; 1987). After pilot studies were conducted in the summers of 1985 and 1986, a year-round seminar schedule was implemented in September of 1986. With an annual budget of $2 million and a staff of 25 employees, the

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center is currently housed in a new $7 million complex complete with two residential buildings.

The new facility was established to...

> provide career teachers with opportunities to study advanced topics in the sciences, arts, and humanities and to engage in informed discourse, assisted by able mentors and outstanding leaders from all walks of life; and otherwise to offer opportunity for teachers to engage in scholarly pursuits through a center dedicated exclusively to the advancement of teaching as an art and as a profession (Mesibov; 1987).

It is a means by which the state identifies, honors, and rewards its outstanding teachers. It affords participants a renewal experience and through this process encourages the most intellectually able persons to remain in the teaching profession.

NCCAT's approach to development is distinctive. Creative thinking across academic disciplines is wedded to concrete experiences in such ways as to release heretofore untapped energies and insights. As McPherson (1987), the center's first director puts it...

> The usual accoutrements of higher education--degrees, diplomas, certificates, lectures and notes, course exams, and grades--are missing at NCCAT. Here, in an institutional setting, is that vaunted learning for the sake of learning which most teachers cherish for their students and themselves. Minds are stretched, thinking processes are sharpened, and conceptual skills are expanded in the seminar format that lies at the heart of the NCCAT experience. The emphasis is on debate, dialogue, and discourse rather than more passive forms of learning.

Several key assumptions govern the creation of each new week-long seminar at NCCAT. It is assumed that participants already know how to be

effective teachers. No attempt is made to instruct participants in the technical aspects of their craft. Rather, preference is shown to what is called the "bread-baking" type of facilitator who "mixes, pounds, and shapes, but also has the sense to stand back and let discussions take their own unexpected turns" (McPherson, Rinnander, & Rud; 1987).

In order to come to NCCAT, participants must be teaching full time in the state of North Carolina and be acknowledged as outstanding teachers. Those who are accepted, come to Cullowhee, North Carolina in small heterogeneous groups of 18 to 20 people, representing all geographical areas of the state and all teaching disciplines. Before they arrive, participants complete selected readings in preparation for their chosen seminar. While at the center, participants typically become a cohesive, compassionate, and enthusiastic band. Small group sizes assure that there is always "plenty of time for each person's voice to be heard and valued" (McPherson, Rinnander, & Rud; 1987).

The Living Seminar

The primary vehicle for renewal and development, and at the center of the NCCAT experience, is the Interdisciplinary seminar. An extensive variety of seminars are offered throughout the year. Recent offerings included "Discovery," an examination of the process of discovery and the conditions that foster creativity; "Conflict and Compromise," a look at how American foreign policy is formulated; and "Humans on Earth," a field study of the unique biosphere of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Upcoming seminars include "The Company of Animals," "Cowboy Culture and the New Old West," "Americans In Paris," "Mind Tools: The

Human Mathematics Connection," "A Gem of an Idea," and "You Can't Drive With The Emergency Brakes On." Eligible guests are provided brief descriptions and dates of all upcoming seminars. While they are encouraged to select topics with which they are only marginally familiar and are not directly related to their teaching assignments, they are free to select a seminar of their choice.

Because of their experiential or hands-on approach, seminars at NCCAT are sometimes referred to as "living seminars." They involve a varied range of activities. Examples include such things as repelling off mountain sides, gem mining, participating in anthropological digs, star gazing, scientific field studies, visits to a local Indian reservation, day trips to historical sites, story telling, folk dancing, and poetry writing. These highly participative activities are augmented by readings, media presentations, demonstrations, and addresses by visiting experts. The idea is to immerse participants in more natural environment and rekindle the child-like curiosity and creativity that was once theirs. To help participants escape the myopia which sometimes prevents them from looking at everyday events in a holistic manner.

The seminars are planned by a core of Center Fellows who are specialists in the arts, humanities, and sciences. Center Fellows, not necessary males, serve an employment term of one to three years. They are assisted as necessary by faculty from near-by Western Carolina University. Facilitators for the various seminars come from all parts of the country and from all walks of life. In the past they have included a former secretary of state, well known scientists, and noted novelists. The per participant cost for each seminar is approximately $1,650 and is completely paid for by the state of North Carolina.

Reward, Renewal and Retention

Early in its conception the founders of NCCAT established various principles by which the center would operate. Foremost among these principles were three new "R's;" Reward, Renewal, and Retention (NCCAT; 1990). As to reward, participants are treated to an all-expense-paid trip to the mountains. From the moment they arrive, NCCAT employees pet and pamper their guests as if they were Hollywood celebrities (Graves; 1988). They are served breakfast in bed. Newspapers and fresh fruit are brought to their private quarters daily. They have free access to tennis courts, swimming pools, library facilities, and walking trails. Such treatment can go along way in bolstering self-esteem and engender a sense of importance.

Away from the everyday grind, quests find the atmosphere at NCCAT ideal for renewing the physic, relaxing the body, and expanding the intellect. Located in the picturesque village of Cullowhee the setting provides individuals a rare opportunity to step back from their everyday work situations and view their professional roles in a new and broader context. Matters and relationships which had here-to-fore escaped their attention now come into focus. For many, this is the very first time they have had the luxury of large blocks of unstructured time to savor and use solely for their own development (McPherson, Rinnander, & Rud; 1987.

The third R, Retention, represents the core mission of the center. It is for the state of North Carolina to keep its most competent teachers in the classroom. The rationale behind the NCCAT strategy is simple and straightforward. Keep your best teachers excited about learning by

providing them a truly marvelous learning experience. Keep teachers in the profession by giving them the recognition and respect they so richly deserve. Hang on to your most productive teachers by rewarding them for outstanding performance. Put teachers in a life-long development mode by supplying them with some of the essentials ingredients needed for personal growth (i.e., opportunities for renewal and mental stimulation).

The Impact

Though only five years old, this small center appears to be having a visible impact on participants. This is evident, in part, by written comments made by those who have trekked to Cullowhee. For example, Pam Brewer, North Carolina Teacher of the Year, tells colleagues, "Being the State Teacher of the Year, I have had more opportunity than most for educational experiences this past year. But nothing, nothing, nothing, touches that experience in Cullowhee. My experiences there were life-changing" (McPherson & Shapiro; 1987). Elouise White, an elementary teacher from Elizabeth City, explains, "My week at NCCAT was the most rewarding and stimulating experience of my teaching career" (NCCAT; 1990). Sylvia Faulk, an elementary teacher in Raleigh, says "I came away from the seminar renewed within - ready to incorporate what I had learned in my life, both personally and professionally" (NCCAT; 1990). "I've recovered a lot of what I was before" says Jody Henley, a high school music teacher from Greensboro (Graves; 1988).

The impact of the center can also be seen in the subsequent actions of its guests. Participants have asked for the opportunity to return to the center to work on individual projects. This is now possible through a

Teacher Scholar program. They have expressed a desire to return to the center as in-tact groups. Special week-long alumni seminars are now offered at the center and at other locations around the nation. Furthermore, weekend seminars for alumni are held on a regular basis throughout the state of North Carolina. But perhaps even more telling of the center's effects is the way participants have formed their own small support groups and project teams. Many get together on a regular basis. They have taken charge of their own renewal and development processes. In addition, NCCAT has served as a catalyst for the creation of two new professional organizations, High School Teachers of Psychology and Teachers of Economics.

As to whether NCCAT is keeping the states' most able teachers in the classroom, it is too early to tell. An out-of-state, independent consulting firm has been commissioned to conduct an on-going external evaluation of the center. But even before any hard evaluation data has become available, other development centers are being explicitly modeled after NCCAT. One such facility is the Center for the Advancement and Renewal of Educators (CARE) in San Francisco, California.

Conclusion

More and more employers are seeking to hire the minds, not just the backs of its workers. Instead of just following orders, employees are being required to think, to make important decisions, and find creative solutions to everyday problems. Today's employees are now seeking more than just monitory rewards from their work, they are also looking for psychological stimulation and satisfaction (Cohen; 1991). As more organizations

recognize the need to renew worker's physics, develop their creative problem solving skills, and provide them psychological rewards for their efforts, the more demand there is likely to be for NCCAT-like educational experiences. Currently their is a plethora of vendors providing technical training on a wide range of subjects. However, very few providers are currently offering quality renewal seminars focusing on developing the creative problem solving skills of workers.

Depending upon its facilities and location, some rural colleges may be in a position to offer residential seminars such as those provided at NCCAT. They could be offered year around or only during certain months of the year. They could be of varrying durations, anywhere from 2-3 days to an entire week. They could be tailored made for particular professional groups e.g., educators, nurses, or police officers. In addition to self-renewal, creative thinking, and problem solving principles, the seminars could also incorporate empowerment and self-directed work teams concepts. Small rural colleges and universities looking for economically viable programing opportunities may want to further investigate the plausibility of offering professional growth programs.

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